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ABSTRACT

In June 2002, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) adopted a new set of goals for the 21st century. Those goals included reaching every student, from preschool to high school, to ensure that achievement exceeds national averages and that performance gaps are closed. According to this brief report, research clearly shows that quality summer programs for struggling students are essential to closing those gaps. This report describes the efforts in 2002 by several states and local schools to maintain and improve their summer programs. It begins with a recap of an earlier SREB report, "Summer School: Unfilled Promise" (June 2002). This report includes successes, failures, and practices. In states with strict standards for promotion and graduation, summer school gives students a fair chance to succeed. Students who repeat grades are more likely to drop out of school eventually. Between 40 percent and 50 percent of students who participate in high-quality summer programs can be expected to improve their performance to passing levels. The report concludes that summers without meaningful learning doom some students to failure. (Contains two tables.) (WFA)

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Summer School and Summer Learning 2002: Progress and Challenges

David R. Denton

November 2002

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Summer School and Summer Learning 2002:

Progress and Challenges

SREB

David R. Denton

In June 2002 the Southern Regional Education Board adopted a new set of goals for the 21st century. An overriding theme of *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* is that "we must aim to reach every student" from preschool through high school to ensure that achievement "for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed." Research clearly shows that quality summer programs for struggling students are essential to closing the gaps.

Efforts by several states and local schools to maintain and improve their summer programs in 2002 demonstrate what can be accomplished — even in difficult times — if there is a real commitment to doing what is right for students.

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The SREB report *Summer School: Unfulfilled Promise* (June 2002) focused on the potential for high-quality summer-school programs to help struggling students avoid failure. A good summer-school program must do more than just give students one last chance to avoid repeating a grade or failing to graduate. It also must work to combat the "summer slide," the well-documented loss of prior learning that happens to all students during a summer without focused learning activities. Research clearly shows that the "summer slide" affects struggling students more than successful ones. That means that every year without summer school makes the gap between the best and worst students grow larger and harder to overcome.

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Summer School: Unfulfilled Promise identified a series of interrelated problems that prevent summer school from fulfilling its potential. These problems include:

- failure to recognize that summer school is essential to any serious effort to give all students a chance to succeed;
- lack of adequate, reliable funding for free summer school for struggling students;
- lack of state guidance on what makes summer school effective; and
- lack of systematic collection and analysis of data on the availability and quality of existing summer-school programs.

The sagging national economy made summer 2002 a challenging time to address these problems. Efforts by several states and local schools to maintain and improve their summer programs in 2002 demonstrate what can be accomplished — even in difficult times — if there is a real commitment to doing what is right for students.

DOING THE RIGHT THING IN THE FACE OF ADVERSITY

Summer School: Unfulfilled Promise concluded that high-quality summer programs need to be available to struggling students for free every year in order to ensure the fair and equitable application of rigorous standards for grade promotion and graduation. Summer school must be an integral part of the overall educational program and must not disappear every time the economy falters. In 2002, newspapers nationwide reported that budget cuts resulted in the cancellation of or sharp reductions to summer-school programs in school districts ranging in size from 2,400 students in Batesburg-Leeville, South Carolina, to more than a million students in New York City, the nation's largest school system.

➢ Funding cuts for the school district in rural **Johnston County,** North Carolina, forced district officials to review their priorities for summer school in 2002. Johnston County negotiates a contract for success with each student and his or her parents; providing special help for students at risk of failing is a fundamental part of Johnston County's responsibilities under these contracts. The district trimmed its summer programs for successful students but not for failing students. Johnston County students who opt to enroll in summer school must pay fees, but the program is free for students who are required to attend to avoid having to repeat a grade. (Johnston County's summer-school program was featured as an exemplary program in *Summer School: Unfulfilled Promise.)*

Note: All reports are available for download from the SREB Web site, www.sreb.org.

- The **Miami-Dade County,** Florida, school district — Florida's largest — dealt with severe funding cuts in 2002 by cutting its summer-school budget by $15 million (27 percent). It focused its summer-school efforts on the students who needed it most and enforced strict attendance standards. Miami-Dade's summer school usually provides opportunities for students who want to get ahead in their coursework as well as for struggling students. This year, eligibility was limited to students who failed either a grade or a required course, who scored at the lowest level on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment test, or whose teachers recommended that they attend summer school in math or reading. Enrollment and costs were reduced further by disqualifying 3,800 eligible students who did not attend at least one of the first two days of summer school. The district has found that students who miss the first few days of summer school usually do not attend regularly enough to get much benefit, so excluding them allowed resources to be used for students who were serious about improving their performance. Miami-Dade's summer school is free for all students.

- In **Fairfax County,** Virginia — the largest Virginia school district in the Washington, D.C., area — summer school is an annual institution. A special team works throughout the school year to make sure the program meets the needs of all students. Between summer 2001 and summer 2002, enrollment increased by 15 percent. At the same time, the county's population increased by less than 2 percent. The increased summer-school attendance was attributed partly to a new "conditional promotion" policy that went into effect in 2002. Under this policy, middle school students who are near the borderline between passing and failing can be promoted to the next grade on the condition that they attend summer school to improve their skills in English language arts and/or math. School officials also believe the rise in summer-school attendance is related to the increasing number of students (and their parents) who want extra preparation for the state's Standards of Learning tests, which all third- through 12th-graders must take. Fairfax charges up to $600 for summer school but uses a sliding scale for low-income families.

- The **Chicago** Public Schools Summer Bridge program served almost 33,000 struggling students in 2002, the largest number since the program began in 1996. Only 60 percent improved their performance enough to avoid repeating grades, compared with more than 70 percent in each of the previous two years. Both the increased number of failing students at the end of the school year and the lower percentage of students promoted after attending summer school were attributed primarily to higher promotion standards that went into effect in 2001-2002. Though local media expressed great concern about the drop in the percentage of students who showed marked improvement after summer school, most summer schools would regard a 60 percent success rate as a triumph. (The Summer Bridge program was described as an exemplary big-city summer-school program in *Summer School: Unfulfilled Promise.)*

HIGH STANDARDS AND FAIR CHANCES GO HAND IN HAND

In states with strict standards for promotion and graduation, summer school not only gives students a fair chance to succeed but also makes sense financially. It is expensive to pay for a student to repeat a grade, and research has shown that students who repeat grades are more likely to drop out of school eventually. Even though summer school is sound public policy, however, only two SREB states — **Delaware** and **Louisiana** — require summer school for students who are failing.

Most researchers have found that between 40 percent and 50 percent of students who participate in high-quality summer programs can be expected to improve their performance to passing levels. (As noted previously, Chicago's recent passing rates of 60 percent or more are unusually good.) Even students who do not reach passing levels, however, can make enough progress to keep from falling even further behind at the beginning of the next school year than they were at the end of the previous year.

➢ In spring 2000 **Louisiana** began requiring fourth- and eighth-graders to pass the state's LEAP exam, which measures mastery of content standards in English and math, in order to be promoted to the next grade. Students who do not pass the LEAP exam by the end of the school year are required to attend summer school and retake the test at the end of the summer. In practice, the summer-school requirement is weakened because students may retake the test at the end of the summer even if they do not attend summer school. Overall, more than 80 percent of eligible students attended summer school in 2002. Attendance generally is worse in eighth grade than in fourth. One suburban New Orleans district reported that more than half of eighth-graders who were required to attend summer school did not.

RESULTS ON THE SUMMER 2002 LOUISIANA LEAP RETEST

	Grade 4		Grade 8	
	English	Math	English	Math
Percent of test-takers who passed	50%	53%	38%	29%
Percent who improved but did not pass	31	29	36	42
Percent who did not improve	19	18	26	29

Source: Louisiana Department of Education

Unfortunately, data on the end-of-summer retest do not allow for comparison of results for students who attended summer school and those who did not. However, the fact that significantly fewer Louisiana eighth-graders than fourth-graders passed the retest may reflect the lower rate of summer-school attendance among eighth-graders.

➢ **Delaware** has required third-, fifth-, eighth- and 10th-graders to take end-of-grade tests in English, writing and math since 1998. Scores are registered on a five-point scale; Levels 1 and 2 are considered below state standards. In 2002, for the first time, third-, fifth- and eighth-graders who scored at Level 1 on the reading and/or math tests in the spring were required to attend summer school and then retake the tests. Summer school was recommended for students who scored at Level 2, and local districts have the option of making it a requirement. Districts use the test scores as one factor in determining whether students should repeat grades or be promoted. Low-scoring 10th-graders are not required to attend summer school because students have many opportunities during the next two school years to retake all or part of the test before graduation.

State education officials cannot explain conclusively why eighth-graders' scores on the writing test consistently are higher than the scores of third-, fifth- and 10th-graders. The Delaware Department of Education is working with national writing experts to find the answer. Partly because of this uncertainty, students who score poorly on the writing test are not required to attend summer school or retake the test. Conversely, eighth-graders consistently perform much worse on the math exam than do third- and fifth-graders. Department of Education officials attribute this gap primarily to the recent adoption of higher standards and new teaching methods in middle school math. Department officials expect eighth-grade math scores to improve as teachers become more familiar with the changes.

PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS WHO SCORED BELOW STATE STANDARDS ON THE DELAWARE END-OF-GRADE TESTS, SPRING 2002

	Grade 3		Grade 5		Grade 8		Grade 10	
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 1	Level 2	Level 1	Level 2	Level 1	Level 2
Reading	9%	12%	9%	3%	11%	17%	17%	17%
Writing	12	42	5	46	3	26	5	46
Math	11	17	15	18	27	25	30	27

Source: Delaware Department of Education

Detailed statistics are not released for the summer retests, but about 44 percent of Delaware students who retook the tests in 2002 improved their scores enough to be promoted. Third- and fifth-graders were more likely to improve their scores than were eighth-graders.

➢ In the late 1990s, the **Baltimore,** Maryland, city school system began a serious effort to improve student performance. The effort focused on improving instruction in reading and math, offering extra time and extra help during the year for struggling students, and establishing strict standards for promotion to the next grade. Although other factors may be considered, promotion depends primarily on scores on the Terra Nova, a commercial standardized test, and on the state's required math and reading tests. The Baltimore City School Board has raised the passing scores on the tests regularly, and in 2001-2002 the board adjusted the language of the promotion standards to close several loopholes that they felt had allowed too many failing students to be promoted. Elementary and middle school students who have not passed the tests by the end of the school year may attend a five-week summer school to improve their scores. Those who do not attend the summer program usually are held back automatically, although some may be promoted after parental appeals.

About 20,000 of the system's 70,000 elementary and middle school students (29 percent) were at risk of failing at the end of the 2001-2002 school year. Eighty-one percent of those struggling students attended summer school, but only 36 percent of those who attended improved their scores enough to be promoted. That success rate, which is significantly lower than the typical success rate of about 50 percent in recent years, undoubtedly reflects the higher standards. (More students in the middle grades than in the elementary grades improved their scores enough to be promoted. The passing rate for elementary school students who attended summer school was 27 percent, compared with 42 percent for middle grades students who attended summer school.) These percentages mean that about 14,000 Baltimore students in grades one through eight will repeat a grade this year. Although addressing so many students' needs is daunting, the school board resolved not to weaken the promotion policy and promised that all retained students will get extra help during the school year so they can meet promotion requirements in 2003.

Summer school always has been free for struggling students in Baltimore's elementary and middle schools. In previous years high school students were required to pay for each makeup course they took. When those fees were eliminated in 2002, summer-school attendance by high school students doubled. However, at only 42 percent of eligible students, attendance still was disappointing.

Technology expands access and lowers costs

The steady expansion of distance learning programs in recent years inevitably raises the question of whether courses offered online can be effective in helping students avoid failure. Distance learning potentially could reduce schools' personnel costs during the summer, make a wider range of high-quality courses available (especially in small, rural school districts), and provide increased flexibility in scheduling student work. Questions remain, however, about how to balance these benefits against the need to monitor students' progress and to provide them with individualized help in particular problem areas.

Many different online courses are available in the SREB region. Only four states, however — **Alabama, Arkansas, Florida** and **Kentucky** — have statewide virtual schools that offer summer courses for struggling students under a single, centralized administration. (The **Maryland** Department of Education, which has worked closely with local school districts to identify needs and to build quality-control systems, expects to begin offering courses statewide in summer 2003.)

All four of these programs are quite new (Florida's program, the oldest, is entering its fifth year), and they vary considerably in structure and operation. There are substantial differences in the amount of control that local schools are required to exercise over students who take online courses. Some require students to do their online work in school facilities with on-site monitors and teachers who can provide individual assistance. Other programs allow students more freedom to work from home or other remote sites.

All of these statewide virtual schools operate year-round and offer courses for successful students who want extra credit or electives as well as courses for those who need to make up required work. Students who need help in meeting graduation requirements originally were not expected to constitute a large percentage of online students. However, enrollment by these students has made summer the busiest season for the statewide virtual schools, and program officials are investigating ways to be more responsive to the needs of struggling students. As these programs mature and expand, organizers must determine how much monitoring and control individual students need to gain the optimal benefit from online courses. Addressing these concerns will require programs to design and implement more sophisticated systems to collect and analyze data.

In addition to these state programs, several local school districts offered online summer programs in 2002. Some of these programs have succeeded, but, as statewide programs become more sophisticated and offer more courses, most local districts undoubtedly will defer to the state programs. (Such has been the case in Florida.) State programs are more cost-effective for local schools and offer more quality control to ensure that all students who take online courses receive comparable instruction and are held to the same rigorous standards.

- **Alabama's Online High School** was established by the Program for Rural Services and Research at the University of Alabama. The online school is designed to allow school systems to expand course offerings of all types, including courses for struggling students, without having to add teachers. The program works with the Alabama State Department of Education to make certain that courses are aligned with state curriculum standards. Students do their online coursework at sites determined by the high schools, which must provide on-site coordinators to "ensure that students remain engaged in their coursework." Students register for courses through their school guidance counselors. Students may register for entire courses (one credit) or for half-courses (one-half credit) either to make up required courses or to accelerate their progress toward graduation. E-teachers interact regularly with individual students. The schools award credits for the courses. Noncredit "remediation units" are available for students who are having trouble passing the state's high school graduation exam. The courses cost $175 per half-credit for Alabama public school students, and schools pay these fees for their students. Remediation units are offered free to schools that provide teachers to give on-site assistance to students. All students may take a practice graduation exam online at no charge.

  In summer 2002, 117 students enrolled in credit courses and 53 took noncredit remediation courses. Of those enrolled in credit courses, 81 (69 percent) passed. An estimated 80 percent of those taking credit courses were trying to make up required credits, but the data do not allow for disaggregation of results by the students' reasons for taking the courses.

- The **Arkansas Virtual High School,** a project of the Arkansas Department of Education, is intended to expand access to an alternative learning environment for students who need help completing required coursework. For students to participate, their schools must provide facilities where the students will do their online work and must supply on-site personnel to monitor the students and to provide them with technical assistance. Schools also must agree to accept the grades awarded by the online teachers and to award credit for students' satisfactory completion of the courses. Students may register for half-credit (one semester) or full-credit courses. Full-credit courses require two consecutive online semesters to complete, just as they would in a traditional setting, so a student who registers for a full-credit course in the summer completes the second half of the course during the fall semester. The summer 2002 semester marked the end of the project's pilot phase, during which all courses were free. Beginning in fall 2002, the courses cost $150 per half-credit. In most cases, the schools will pay the fees for their students.

  Of the 72 students who enrolled in the summer 2002 semester, an estimated 80 percent were trying to make up required credits. Only 34 students (47 percent) completed their courses, and it is not possible to separate the results for the students who were doing makeup work. Program administrators think more students will complete their courses when they or their schools have to pay for them.

- The **Florida Virtual School** is the oldest and by far the largest virtual school in the SREB region. Its mission is to provide high school students with high-quality, technology-based educational opportunities. The program began in two school systems in the 1997-1998 school year and since has expanded to all 67 school systems in the state as well as many private schools. Students who successfully complete courses receive credit from their schools. Any eighth- through 12th-grader in a Florida public school, charter school or private school or any approved home-schooled student may register for courses with approval from his or her school counselor, administrator and/or parent. Students register online through the Florida Virtual School Web site. After registering, students must print out the enrollment form and obtain the necessary signatures from school officials or, in the case of home-schooled students, from parents. Counselors rarely reject students' registration for courses, and legislation that takes effect Jan. 1, 2003, will make it more difficult for schools to reject students' registration for online courses that parents have approved. Only the system's capacity presents a real barrier for a student who wants to take a course.

  Although schools are not required to provide facilities or equipment for students who take courses through the virtual school, many schools do so in order to allow students time to work online during the school day and to give access to students who may not have that opportunity at home. Most students do their online work at home; even those who do online work at school usually work at home as well. Scheduling is very flexible, and students can work at their own pace. Completion of online courses is not tied to a specified number of hours in class but to how long it takes a student to master the state standards for the course. As a result, courses are not modified to fit into a relatively short summer session. Students who register for a half-credit course generally can finish the work during the summer, but some may not finish until the fall. If they wish, students who take a full-credit course can work at an accelerated pace to finish it by the end of the summer. More often, they complete the second half of the full-credit course in the fall. All Florida Virtual School courses are free for Florida residents.

  The Florida Virtual School has proven to be very popular. When registration opened for summer 2002, more than 8,000 students registered within three days. Registration had to be shut down, and another 8,000 students were put on waiting lists. Although organizers of the virtual school surmise that some students enroll to make up required credits, especially during the summer, there is no way to distinguish them from students who take courses for other reasons and thus no way to determine their success rate.

- The **Kentucky Virtual High School**, a service of the Kentucky Department of Education, began in 1999 as a governor's initiative to give more students access to a challenging high school curriculum. The program was developed primarily for students in public and private high schools and those who were being home-schooled. A few courses were open to middle school students who received approval

from their schools. The program staff have worked hard to explain the potential benefits of online learning and have sought to offer courses that meet students' needs. Program expansion has been slow because state funding has been limited.

Local school districts handle registration for courses and award credits to students who complete courses successfully. Public school students must receive approval from their schools to take or drop credit courses. While some public school districts handle registration for students from private schools or students who are home-schooled, most of these students register directly with the Kentucky Virtual High School. Local school districts provide hardware and software for their students who do not have their own or who do their online work during the school day. The schools are not required to provide personnel to assist with the instruction or to monitor students as they work online. However, the schools must designate a teacher to serve as a point of contact for each student and to communicate with the virtual school about the student's progress or problems. Schools also must arrange for proctors to oversee the required tests at the end of the courses. The virtual high school does not require students to do their online work at a specified time or place. For public school students, the local district can establish a standard procedure for all students, set individual requirements for each student, or allow students independently to work out their schedules with their online teachers. Most students do some online work at school and some at home. The Kentucky Virtual High School maintains a help desk with a toll-free telephone number; the help desk is available 24 hours a day to assist students with technical problems.

The Kentucky Virtual High School offered "credit-recovery courses" for the first time in 2002. Rather than reteaching all course content, teachers in these courses try to identify and focus on gaps in each student's content knowledge. In summer 2002, 26 students took online credit-recovery courses as part of a summer pilot program, and all of them completed the courses successfully. Thirty other students registered for other types of online courses. Some students did their online work at a school location, but most worked at home and/or studied while traveling with their families on vacation. In fall 2002 the virtual school began offering the credit-recovery courses during the school year as well as during the summer. A marketing effort is being launched to increase public awareness of the Kentucky Virtual High School. Online courses of all types cost $275 per half-credit. In some cases, students' school districts pay the fees for public school students, but many districts require parents to pay for credit-recovery courses.

SUMMER OFF EQUALS STUDENTS LOST

In October 2002 an article with the headline "Changing goals put end to summer school" appeared in the Miami Herald. The article described how the introduction of the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) caused many Florida school districts to place "more faith these days in year-round help for faltering students, rather than the traditional quick summer fix that didn't seem to do much good." A closer reading of the article reveals that these districts ended summer school because of funding shortages combined with the belief that a "year-round" program of extra help for struggling students can skip over the summer months and still be effective. In school districts where summer school traditionally is considered only a quick fix to cover up the schools' failures during the year, responding to funding cuts by eliminating summer school may seem like an easy answer.

Too many school districts throughout the SREB states still believe that summer school is an expendable frill. This misconception ignores the growing evidence that summers without organized learning activities can have devastating effects on the lowest-performing students. It is no accident that the lowest-performing students also tend to come from the lowest-income families. Families who could afford to do so have paid for their children to attend summer programs to improve their performance or expand their opportunities for many years. While many struggling students and their parents may want such educational opportunities — and the high attendance rates for Chicago's tuition-free Summer Bridge program clearly show that they do — these students too often have no choice but to spend the summer educationally idle.

An especially thorny issue facing all types of summer schools, including those offering online courses, is whether families of struggling students should be required to pay for summer-school courses. As with traditional summer schools, funding for many online programs remains tenuous, and student fees can be an important part of operating revenues. In addition, some administrators contend that students are more likely to take full advantage of the programs if their parents are required to pay for them. On the other hand, parents usually do not pay for special help during the school year, and charging parents for summer school will discourage attendance by students from the poorest families — the students who often need summer school the most. Providing all struggling students with free help during the summer, regardless of how the courses are delivered, is a key to fulfilling summer school's promise.

The state and local summer programs described in this report clearly treat summer school as more than a quick-fix frill. The designers and operators of these programs have accepted public schools' responsibility to provide all the assistance possible to students who are failing. Online virtual schools' efforts to respond to schools' and students' needs for high-quality, affordable courses during the summer demonstrate that summer learning need not be locked into an antiquated educational model. The current push to hold

students more accountable for their performance can offer many opportunities for innovation and creativity, including year-round schools and other innovative models for addressing individual problems that could not be solved during a nine-month school year.

In June 2002 the Southern Regional Education Board adopted a new set of education goals for the 21st century. An overriding theme of *Goals for Education: Challenge to Lead* is that "we must aim to reach every student" from preschool through postsecondary education to ensure that achievement "for all groups of students exceeds national averages and performance gaps are closed." Research clearly shows that quality summer programs for struggling students are essential to closing the gaps, and any school that does not offer such programs essentially gives up on some students. Summers without meaningful learning doom some students to failure.

For more information, please contact David R. Denton, SREB director of school readiness, reading and health affairs at (404) 875-9211 or at david.denton@sreb.org.

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